

A report on the symposium “Juri Lotman and sociosemiotics” (Elva, Estonia, 19–20 May 2017)

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The first symposium devoted to Juri Lotman’s legacy in the discipline of socio-semiotics was recently held in Elva, a small town situated on the banks of Lake Verevi in Tartu County, Estonia. The seminar, entitled “Juri Lotman and sociosemiotics” and organized by the Department of Semiotics of the University of Tartu, saw the participation of distinguished foreign guests as well as a substantial attendance of both local and international fellow semioticians, many of them doctoral students. An informal and friendly environment, coupled with exceptionally warm and sunny weather, created a convivial atmosphere where young and veteran semioticians could meet to discuss the relationship of Juri Lotman, founder of the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics, with sociosemiotics.

Amongst the international guests appeared Professors Suren Zolyan and Patrick Sériot, who, beside actively participating in the gathering, delighted the audience with lectures on subjects related to sociosemiotics, linguistics and biology. These lectures took place in Tartu on the days preceding and following the seminar.²

Professor Suren Zolyan, the Armenian-born former Rector of the Yerevan State Linguistic University, cherished a direct acquaintance with Lotman, who was his teacher at the University of Tartu. Zolyan spent some months in Estonia’s intellectual and academic hub as a young visiting student and had the privilege of attending some of Lotman’s courses. Of his student days in Tartu Zolyan retains vivid memories, and as regards his teacher, Zolyan remembers not only his remarkable intellectual abilities and his kindness coupled with gentle humanity, but also his culinary skills, which Lotman often demonstrated when Boris Uspensky, his good friend and co-author of many works, was visiting the town.

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² Professor Patrick Sériot delivered a lecture titled “Biology for linguists: An obstacle or a royal path to concept building” at the University of Tartu on 18 May; Professor Suren Zolyan gave a lecture on “Culture and sociosemiotics today” on 22 May.

Another noted international guest attending the seminar, Professor Patrick Sériot, a historian of ideas and a Slavist, gained his PhD at the Sorbonne and, after an academic career in Switzerland with a tenure in Linguistics at the University of Lausanne, is now officially retired, although still active in academic life, which is testified by his numerous academic visits abroad. Sériot discussed the issue of language and identities in two lectures titled "Language and nations: Two models". To support his arguments, he addressed an impressive set of examples of national identities based on linguistics issues, excelling with thoroughness as well as elegance of delivery.

Anti Randviir, Senior Research Fellow at the University of Tartu and main organizer of the event together with Tiit Remm, opened the seminar with a talk on *sociosemiotics* (Cobley; Randviir 2009). Interpreting cultures is never an easy task. Following the footsteps of the scholars of the semiotics of culture, Randviir pointed out in his lecture that culture is made of texts and cultural units that function for the generation, maintenance and transmission of culture from generation to generation. From this vantage point, it can be argued that culture is considered a textual whole or a set of texts that are somewhat self-sufficiently organized because texts are agents themselves (and they have a life of their own). A similar line of thought, Randviir argues, was manifest already in an earlier movement of thought, known as New Criticism, especially in the United States where culture is seen as a *tradition*, which, as it were, has a life of its own and thus develops by itself. What texts are retained in the cultural tradition and what texts, to the contrary, are erased, forgotten or expelled from the tradition within the cultural process? Another way to look at things would be to understand the role carried out by "the bearers of culture" or, in other words, the "communicative agents" that operate in the cultural processes. This is an issue ultimately left unresolved within the disciplinary field of semiotics of culture. Whether culture is a compositional process of texts or whether culture functions by means of communicative agents engaging and operating with texts remains a dilemma that has not been paid due attention. A way to disentangle this riddle is by looking at culture as a social phenomenon by definition and, as such, one with a double dimension: the level of the individual and the level of communities.

Randviir's talk was followed by Zolyan's lecture titled "Lotman as a social thinker". In the presentation the speaker commented on the societal side of Lotman's thought. One of the main points of the discussion revolved around the understanding and limits of the notion of 'semiosphere' within cultural semiotics. Kalevi Kull, the head of the Department of Semiotics of the University of Tartu and one of the leading figures in the field of biosemiotics, delivered the third lecture of the day. His talk unravelled the complex and vexed question of the 'self' conceived from a biological and cultural perspective. The other main organizer of the symposium, Tiit Remm, contributed with a paper on the Other in social and cultural space.

The main talks were accompanied by numerous student presentations on various topics, which highlighted the fresh angles and outlooks of the seminar. The themes spanned from biopolitics (Ott Puumeister), semiotics and education (Aleksandr Fadeev), history (Merit Rickberg), online communities (Auli Kütt) and semiotics of the city (Kristina Ivakhnenkova; Ian Weatherseed) to publishing houses (Ehte Puhang), semiotics of literature (Alexandra Milyakina; Tatjana Pilipoveca) and the bibliography on the writings of Juri Lotman and the Tartu–Moscow School of Semiotics (Remo Gramigna).

It is hoped that the symposium may become a regular event; the next seminar on the topic of developmental semiotics is taking place in May 2018.

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Bibliography

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